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ABSTRACT

The emptiness and nothingness associated with writer's block is often described as a kind of death, a place where there is nothing to decide, nothing about which to express an opinion. However, for students who enter the writing classroom from a different culture, the problem may not be lack of ideas, but conflicting ideas. Some of these students are unable to write because they have not discovered a way within the rhetorical conventions of the expository essay to acknowledge or articulate the conflict they experience as they move between the contradictory rhetorical practices of their native and adopted cultures and the opposing ideologies on which these practices are based. Two such students were able to begin writing by narrating their conflict. One student used narration to explore the play between the ideas she was not able to reconcile, phrasing her opening paragraph as an unresolved dilemma. A second student wrote a review of a presentation by a speaker on "Speaking Two Languages in College," which served to distance him from the authoritative voice of the expository essay while allowing him to show a constructive way of dealing with the conflict he could not personally resolve. This approach seemed to enable these students to negotiate opposing ideas in a way that the argumentative form of the expository essay did not, yet they were able to incorporate it into the expository essay in very creative ways.(Contains eight references.) (CR)

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Jan Corbett
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NARRATING DIFFERENCE: A CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACH TO WRITER'S BLOCK

The emptiness and nothingness associated with writer's block is often described as a kind of death, a place where there is nothing to decide, nothing about which to express an opinion. However, for students who enter the writing classroom from a different culture, the problem may not be a lack of ideas, but conflicting ideas. Some of these students are unable to write because they have not discovered a way within the rhetorical conventions of the expository essay to acknowledge or articulate the conflict they experience as they move between the contradictory rhetorical practices of their native and adopted cultures, and the opposing ideologies on which these practices are based.

I first became aware of this conflict in individual conferences with students from various cultural backgrounds who were struggling with writer's block. This paper describes two of these students, and the way they were able to begin writing by narrating their conflict. This strategy seemed to enable these students to negotiate opposing ideas in a way that the argumentative form of the expository essay did not, and yet they were able to incorporate it into the expository essay in very creative ways. This approach has implications for our understanding of writer's block, as well as pedagogical implications for the writing classroom.

Theories of Writer's Block

The "death" image associated with writer's block is described by Sharon Kubasak as an early stage in the writing process, the point at which the writer is overwhelmed by the vastness of what has to be covered (373). Agnes Nin describes it as being "mysteriously exhausted, deep down" (qtd. in Kubasak 374) and Virginia Woolf refers to it as a time when her brain is "as blank as a window" (qtd. in Kubasak 374).

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Others have described writer's block as the presence of an obstacle and suggested that the condition may be cured by identifying and eliminating this obstacle. Edmund Bergler, who is credited with first using the term "writer's block" in his psychoanalytic study of the writing process,[1] attributes this obstacle as internal conflict which he claims to have successfully treated with psychotherapy in thirty-six professional writers (Leader 4). Michael Rose describes writer's block as an external obstacle, locating it in such conditions as conflicting composing rules,[2] insufficient attention to planning, and inappropriate assumptions about writing" (236).

Zachery Leader, who has written one of the most exhaustive studies of writer's block, explores a number of affective theories of writer's block, including Freud's description of repression (48-54), Jung's concept of "the transcendent function" in creativity (56-61), Otto Rank's emphasis on will power (70-71), and the problem-solving theories of such ego psychologists as Eric Erikson and Heinz Hartman (74-81).

Although Leader expands the definition of writer's block to the affective realm, and although he goes on to attribute some cases of writer's block to such contextual factors as Romantic concepts of creativity, gender-biased concepts of writing, and cultural concepts of the permanence of the written text, he has been criticized for failing to fully account for such cultural factors as race and class (Kellman 286). This criticism points to a vast number of additional factors and the amount and complexity of these factors tempts us to wish for a cozy retreat to Rose's cognitive approach, or to such psychoanalytic approaches as repression and ego strength. If writer's block could be solved with instruction in prewriting or with psychological counseling, our task as writing professors would be simplified; we would either provide strategies for free writing, outlining, and delayed editing, or send our students to the campus counseling center. However, experience shows that the analysis and treatment of writer's block is more complex than this.

[1]Zachary Leader makes this claim, referring to Bergler's *The Writer and Psychoanalysis* (1).
[2]See Rose's detailed discussion of the way composing rules can conflict with each other in "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block" (*College Composition and Communication*, 31, 389-401).

Individual problems with writer's block do not easily fit into cognitive, psychological, or cultural paradigms. I want to describe two of these cases.

Cases of Writer's Block

The first case involves a student in an expository writing class whose real name is Dong,[3] but who prefers the Americanization of his Vietnamese name, Donny. He has been assigned an essay in which he will either compare essays in his reader about living in two cultures, or in which he will compare his own experience to that described in one of the essays. Donny has chosen the last option, but he is facing a frustrating case of writer's block.

He is obviously agitated as he discusses his problem, but each suggestion that he explore the topic meets with only half-hearted attempts. "I can't think of anything," he says over and over, with what I finally realize is not a lack of affect, but very strong resistance. In desperation, I ask, "What do you not want to write?" This question seems to provide an opening for Donny to explain the difficulty he has experienced in living in two worlds. His parents brought him to the United States when he was three years old and he quickly learned to speak English. But he was sent back to Vietnam to live with his grandparents during his high school years so that he could identify with his Vietnamese culture. He has now returned to the United States to attend college, and he feels that he does not belong in either country.

Donny could avoid dealing with this conflict if he chose one of the other, less personal, options for the assignment, but he insists that he wants to write about his personal experience. As we examine his conflict, Donny is able to articulate—perhaps for the first time—his difficulty in deciding which culture he values most. While attending public school in the United States, he had been taught to value the American culture. But when he returned to Vietnam, he was persuaded that his first allegiance was to the country

[3]Names have been changed to keep students anonymous.

of his ancestors, a country which viewed the war his parents escaped as "the American war."

Donny describes his feelings as a kind of retreat into nothingness. "I just kind of go blank," he says. There seems to be "nothing there," even when Donny is prodded to produce a simple free-writing exercise. This "nothing" represents a major impediment to writing: it is a serious writer's block.

In the second case an adult student in her late twenties discusses her inability to find a topic for a research paper. Barbara exhibits an unusually low level of energy when prompted to begin brainstorming. Asked to explain what topics she might have considered, but discarded, her response is not immediately revealing. She reviews two earlier papers she completed for the course. One examined studies of the bonding of mothers and infants, suggesting that working mothers cause irreparable harm to their infants because their schedules prohibit bonding. A second paper reviewed the book *Women Who Love Too Much*, in which the term "codependency" is used to describe women who live in psychologically damaging submissive relationships. "I don't know why I'm interested in codependency," Barbara says. When asked about a topic related to women's issues, which seems central to both papers, Barbara becomes defiant. "I'm not a raving feminist," she says. Pushed to reveal why she feels so strongly about not writing about this issue, Barbara begins to talk about her conflict with women's roles. She discusses the caretaker role with a great deal of emotion, explaining that she is the oldest of eight children, and that she had to take responsibility for her siblings. Almost breaking down, she says, "I didn't get to go to college." She was required to work after high school and was not able to begin her college career until the youngest sibling became independent.

Further probing reveals that Barbara is struggling with the conflict between her desire for a fulfilling career and her fear that, should she marry and have children, she would either contribute to the demise of the family by not bonding with her infant, or she would have to give up a career and submit to a role of codependency. She describes her

dilemma as one which leaves her feeling "empty inside," "washed out," and as if there is "no escape." These images describe a serious writer's block.

Writer's Block as a Rhetorical Problem

When I first analyzed these cases, I came to the conclusion that the writer's block experienced by Barbara and Donny was based on ideological conflict, that is, conflicting ideas embedded in conflicting systems of belief.[4] Donny cannot decide whether he values his Vietnamese culture or his American culture; to escape this choice, he "goes blank." Barbara wants to have both a career and family; she cannot prioritize one over the other and is afraid she will lose both, so she feels "empty inside."

I still believe that Donny and Barbara were experiencing ideological conflict, but I now feel that this conflict is fundamentally rhetorical. We cannot understand conflicting ideas without understanding the conflicting rhetorical conventions in which they are communicated, as Bakhtin suggests when he calls for returning to the "neglected" study of rhetoric as a means of understanding the philosophical roots of literary discourse (267).

Barbara and Donny are unable to reconcile the conflicting ideologies about which they are attempting to write because they are unable to negotiate the conflicting rhetorics of the cultures in which these ideologies are embedded and to accommodate these rhetorics to the unitary style of the expository essay. Barbara wants to write about her need for both dependence and independence, a concern which can, she thinks, only be expressed in conflicting rhetorics: the rhetoric in which the traditional feminine role of caretaker is communicated and the rhetoric of independence which Barbara equates with "raving feminists." Donny faces a similar problem when he tries to explain his allegiance to two cultures with opposing ideologies and opposing rhetorics: the communal patriotism of Vietnam in which individual voice is submerged to the will of the community, and the self-actualizing patriotism of the United States with its rhetoric of individual authority.

Studies of Ideology and Rhetoric

[4]Corbett, Janice. "What Do You Not Want to Write?" Newark, DE: *Proceedings of the conference of the Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association* ,

A number of studies in contrastive rhetoric have described rhetorical conflict. One of the most instructive is Carolyn Matalene's account of her attempt to teach writing to college students in the Shanxi Province of China. When Matalene asked these students to keep journals of their experiences in learning to write in English, she was surprised to discover that their journals contained accounts of memorizing English words. The students were unfamiliar with expressive journal writing and they resisted this writing; as the semester progressed Matalene reports that the number of journals turned in "gradually and silently diminished" (791). She concluded that the rhetoric of post-Romantic Westerners, which values originality, individuality, and what we call the "Authentic Voice" (790) cannot be co-opted by Chinese students for ideological reasons; they are not expected to be original in their writing, but to imitate the ideas and style of their mentors.

A first-hand account of rhetorical conflict is found in an influential article by Min-Zhan Lu, who now teaches in the United States, but who grew up as a bilingual student in Maoist China. Lu describes her conflict as she moved daily from a home in which English was spoken and ideas were freely debated to a school in which she was given sample essays and told to imitate them:

> To identify with the voice of home or school, I had to negotiate through the conflicting voices of both by restating, taking back, qualifying my thoughts. . . But I could not use the interaction comfortably and constructively. Both my parents and my teachers had implied that my job was to prevent that interaction from happening. My sense of having failed to accomplish what they had taught silenced me" (445-446).

In a later article, Lu calls for students from other cultures to "sustain contradiction and turn ambivalence into a new consciousness" ("Conflict" 888). She does not suggest how this consciousness would be shaped as a written text, but I want to suggest that it might involve the narrative rhetorical strategies found in the work of Virginia Woolf, another writer who

experienced writer's block when faced with the task of developing an expository essay to communicate concepts about which she was experiencing ideological conflict.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf struggles to compose a paper for a lecture at a prestigious male university. As she begins her research, she experiences writer's block, signified by a blank piece of paper on which she cannot write a sentence (25). It is not until Woolf explores the contradictory rhetoric practiced by women and men that she is able to write her first sentence. She claims that women write poetically, while men write prosaically, and suggests that one must "think poetically and prosaically at one and the same moment, thus keeping in touch with fact . . . but not losing sight of fiction either . . . " (44). This androgynous approach to the rhetoric of the expository essay allows Woolf to overcome her writer's block.

The resulting text uses strategies generally associated with narration: fictitious characters, imaginary settings, and a coherent plot. Wolf defends these strategies by suggesting that they allow the audience to draw its own conclusions:

> When a subject is highly controversial one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. . . . Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. (4)

Woolf's strategy brings together the rhetoric of the factual essay and the rhetoric of the imaginary narrative in such a way that they inform and shape each other. Her melding of fact and fiction give the text a surprising credibility.

Woolf's text cannot, of course, be imitated, but it provides an example of the way narrative can be used to deal with conflicting rhetorics. The value of this model lies in the process through which it is produced. Inviting students to use a similar process may enable them to develop their own forms while overcoming the writer's block they face as they attempt to negotiate conflicting rhetorics. To illustrate this, I want to conclude with a description of the ways Barbara and Donny incorporated narration into their essays.

Barbara used narration to explore the play between the ideas she had not been able to reconcile, and which were not reconciled within her finished essay. She began the essay by saying: "This essay is not about the suppression of women. Rather, it explores a conflict that causes much confusion and consternation for a woman in her journey toward self-discovery and self-fulfillment." By phrasing her opening paragraph as an unresolved dilemma, Barbara was free to use the essay to narrate the conflict, not resolve it.

Donny took a different approach to the use of narrative conventions. He received permission to write a review of a presentation by a speaker at the campus International Club whose topic was "Speaking Two Languages in College." His review described, in great narrative detail, the speaker's ideas, his dress, his effect on the audience. This story served to distance Donny from the authoritative voice of the expository essay while, at the same time, allowing him to show a constructive way of dealing with the conflict he could not personally resolve.

Although the rhetorical strategies of narration are often looked upon as antithetical to those of academic discourse, they may be useful in situations in which conflicting rhetorics result in writer's block. Bakhtin provides us with a rationale for this when he suggests that narration can be dialogical, especially within the novel:

> . . . all languages . . . are specific points of view on the world. . . As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. . . . They may all be drawn in by the novelist for the orchestration of his themes and for . . . expression of his intentions and values. (292-292)

While our composition students are not writing novels, the narrative strategies generally associated with fiction may enable them to negotiate ideological and rhetorical conflict, and to overcome writers block.

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